

The Educational Significance of the Experience of Resistance: Schooling and the Dialogue between Child and World

Gert Biesta
University of Stirling, UK

Abstract *In this paper I look at education through the question of the connection of child and world. Starting from the observation that it is through action and initiative rather than through thinking or feeling that we connect most directly and immediately with the world, I explore the ways in which we can engage with the resistance we encounter when we act and take initiative. I argue that education needs to take place in the middle ground between two extremes: destruction of what resists and withdrawal from what resists. I refer to this middle ground as the dialogue between child and world and argue that it is through this dialogue that the worldly existence of the child becomes possible. The educational work done in the difficult and frustrating middle ground between world-destruction and self-destruction is related to an old and rather forgotten educational theme, that of the education of the will. I explore different dimension of the education of the will in order to make a case for slow forms of schooling that see the encounter with the experience of resistance as an essential and necessary dimension of what education is about.*

Keywords resistance, dialogue, head, heart and hands, the education of the will, impatience, patience, love for the world, slow schools

"Toute la pédagogie est un travail compliqué ... pour
aider l'enfant à se dégager de la logique du caprice."
Philippe Meirieu (2008, p. 13)

Education: Subject-Centred, Child-Centred, or World-Centred?

The question as to what our educational efforts should centre upon, has been part of the educational discussion for a long time. In this discussion we find, on the one hand, those who argue that content and subject-matter should be the centre of

Gert J.J. Biesta
University of Stirling, UK
gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk

education. On the other hand, and in response to this, we find those who argue that the child should be at the centre. Seen from a historical perspective the educational pendulum seems to swing back and forth between (arguments for) subject-centred education and (arguments for) child-centred education, and many of the great educational thinkers of modern times – such as Erasmus, Comenius, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Pestalozzi, Herbart and Froebel – can be said to occupy a position somewhere on this spectrum. Over the years subject-centred and child-centred education have also become entangled with particular political ideologies, in that an argument for subject-matter is often depicted as “conservative” and an argument for the child often as “progressive.” This is unfortunate, not only because it tends to put all hope for progress on the shoulders of the child, but also because it gives questions about content and subject-matter too much of a conservative taint. In fact, both subject-centred and child-centred education are uneducational extremes (see also Oelkers, 1996), something which was recognised by John Dewey when, early on in his career, he argued that the “problem of all education is to *co-ordinate* the psychological and the social factors” (Dewey, 1895, p. 224; *emph. added*).

To think of education in terms of co-ordination, focuses the attention on the question of the *connection* between child¹ and world, rather than on either the child or the world. Of course, the question of connection can still be understood entirely in terms of subject-matter, that is as the question how we can put as much “world” as possible into the child. From the side of the child the question of co-ordination then becomes an entirely technical one, that is, of adjusting the child so that it can “absorb” or “take in” as much world as possible. (I will return to the question of adjustment below.) But we can articulate the educational interest in connection also differently, that is as the question how we, (in our role) as educators, can help the child to connect with the world or, as I have put it elsewhere (Biesta, 2006; see also Winter, 2011), how education can contribute to the ways in which the child can “come into the world.” Here the educational “task” as seen from the side of the child is one of *engagement* with the world.

In this paper I aim to explore in more detail how we can understand the dynamics and complexities of such engagement, also in order to ask what kind of educational “work” can be done and needs to be done in relation to this. While I focus on the question of engagement, I do not wish to suggest that this is all that

¹ Throughout this paper I will mostly make use of the notion of the “child” to explore the complexities of educational processes and practices. In some places I will refer in more general terms to the “self” – so that the dialogue of child and world is a particular instance of the more general dialogue of self and world – and in some places I will refer to the notion of the “student” rather than the “child.” When the child figures in my argument it is not so much as a natural “given” but rather as a way in which the self appears in educational relationships. Whereas the word “student” expresses this more adequately (see also Biesta, 2010b), this word usually refers only to an older age group (either those in secondary schools or, more frequently, those in colleges and universities). The word “child” should thus be understood in a relational sense and covering a rather broad age range.

education is about. In this regard I agree with Philippe Meirieu (2008, p. 91) when he describes the educational challenge as the double task of engagement *with* and emancipation *from* the world. The task, in other words, is to engage with the world as a subject of action and responsibility and not as an object merely subjected to the world. My paper is motivated by the question to what extent we are (still) able and willing to engage with the world, and stems from a concern that the desire to be in and engage with the world, to lead a worldly rather than a private life, may be waning. My explorations centre on the theme of “resistance” in order to arrive at an argument for a conception of education which is neither child-centred nor subject-centred but thoroughly world-centred, that is, centred on our worldly existence, that is, our existence *in*, *with* and *for* the world.

Head, Heart and Hands

While much education nowadays tends to focus on cognition, thought and the intellect, our head, the domain of knowing and thinking, is only one of the ways in which we can establish a connection with the world. In fact there are three qualitatively different “channels” through which can connect with the world, that is, through knowledge, feelings and actions or, in more active terms, through knowing, feeling and acting. To look at the question of connection in this way brings us back to the old educational adage of “head, heart and hands” (Pestalozzi). When we use our head to think and gain knowledge about the world we might say that we connect at a distance. After all, the world here “appears” as an object of thought and knowledge – an object that is first and foremost located “out there.” Something similar can be said about the domain of the heart, the domain of feeling (albeit that I will look again at this below), in that the feelings we have about the world in a sense also keep us at a certain distance from the world. When we have feelings *about* the world we could say that the world “appears” as an object of our feelings. This is different, however, when we look at the domain of the hands, the domain of action and initiative. Here we might say that the connection is literally immediate, in that it is neither mediated by (our) thoughts nor by (our) feelings. The domain of the hands, the domain of action and initiative, is therefore a very special domain, because it offers us a particular kind of “access” to and connection with the world. Yet it is not only special in the particular way in which it “connects” – direct rather than mediated – but also in the way in which it gives us access to an experience that in my view is of fundamental educational significance. This has to do with the fact that when we act, when we take initiative, we will, sooner or later, at some point and in some way encounter *resistance*.

Encountering the Experience of Resistance

The first thing that the experience of resistance teaches us is that the world we live and act in – and this includes both the material world and the social world – is not a

projection of our mind but has an existence of its own. This means that it is fundamentally *other*. This experience – about which psychoanalysis has important things to say (see, for example, Mahler, Pine & Bergman, 1975) – is, in a sense, a difficult and frustrating experience, or it can be so, because it signifies that there is something “in our way,” so to speak. This raises the question how we might respond to and engage with the experience of resistance. I can see three different options.

One is to try to overcome what resists or what offers us resistance. Here we try to impose our will upon the world and while, in a certain sense, this is what happens when we act and take initiative, the risk is that we end up doing violence to the very “thing” that resists, so that ultimately, at the very end of the spectrum, this response leads to a destruction of the object of resistance – either literally or in the form of a denial of the otherness and strangeness of what we encounter. The other option, which is located at the opposite end of the spectrum, is to shy away from what resists or offers us resistance. It is to withdraw ourselves from what is strange and other; it is not to engage with it, not to connect. If the first response ultimately results in a destruction of the world and thus in a destruction of the very conditions under which the self can come into the world, the second response ultimately results in a destruction of the self as the withdrawal from the world means that the self will not come into the world, will not be able to exist in a worldly way.

The challenge therefore – and this is the third option – is to stay in the frustrating “middle ground” between the two extremes of world-destruction and self-destruction. I refer to this middle ground as “frustrating” because in this middle ground we need to engage with what resists, rather than destroy it or withdraw ourselves from it. We need to come to terms with what resists rather than take an “easy” way (world-destruction or self-destruction). If education has an interest in the ways in which the self can come into the world, then the middle ground between world-destruction and self-destruction is truly an educational space.

Schooling and the Dialogue between Child and World

I wish to refer to this educational “space” as a *dialogical* space and therefore to education as a dialogue between child and world (or, in more general terms, a dialogue between self and world). To invoke the idea of “dialogue” in this context is not meant to suggest that education should proceed in some kind of conversational form, that is, as a dialogue between students or between students and their teachers – for such a conception of dialogical or “dialogic” education see, for example, Alexander (2001) or Wegerif (2007). It is rather to suggest that the encounter between child and world, between the child and that which offers resistance, should be understood in dialogical terms, that is, as an encounter between two “parties” where the aim is to justice to *both* parties. A dialogue is, in this respect, fundamentally different from a contest, as the orientation of a contest is

for one of the parties to win and hence for the other party or parties to lose. The difference between a dialogue and contest also makes clear that whereas a contest at some point reaches an end, a dialogue is an ongoing process and an ongoing challenge, also because the question whether justice is done to all parties involved poses itself again and again. The challenge for education, therefore, is to stay in (the) dialogue and to acknowledge that the difficulty of staying in this place is an essential dimension of what it means to engage *with* and exist *in* the world.

If we look at education in these terms, then a number of educational “tasks” follow. The first – which we could see as the question of *curriculum* – is the task to give form to the dialogue, that is, to make the dialogue, the encounter with what resists, concrete. This partly has to do with the question which curricular domains might be particularly suited for the “staging” of the dialogue between child and world.² But perhaps more importantly it raises a question for all curricular domains – and for the organisation of school life more generally – with regard to the possibilities for children to encounter the world as an object of resistance and to engage with the experience of resistance in a dialogical way, rather than respond with destruction or withdrawal. This is related to a second task – which we could see as the question of *pedagogy* – which has to do with making the encounter between child and world possible, that is, of leading the child to the world, so to speak, and bringing the world to the child. A further task – and perhaps we could characterise this as a fundamental educational responsibility – is to present (the encounter with the experience of) resistance as positive and important, that is, as something that is real and essential, rather than that it is an inconvenience. And a final task is to help the child to stay in the difficult and frustrating middle ground, so that they can endure the frustration and engage with the difficulty and “work through” the experience of resistance rather than shying away from it.

If it makes sense to think of education as the dialogue between child and world and, more specifically, as a dialogical encounter with (the experience of) resistance, then there is also the question whether there is still a place for such encounters in our schools. With regard to this question I would like to make three observations.

² I am particularly interested in the question whether art offers specific possibilities here, and I hope to return to this question in a future publication. At this stage I just wish to make two brief points. One is that I am less interested in the question whether art could become the “location” of the educational encounter with resistance and more in the question whether a particular artistic (rather than aesthetic) might could inform, inspire and perhaps permeate the whole curriculum and the whole educational endeavour. The second point is that I consider it of crucial importance to make a distinction between art and creativity. Where creativity tends to focus on the development of individual capacities and in this sense can be characterised as child-centred, art can – and in my view ought to be understood – as a thoroughly worldly phenomenon, a phenomenon in which precisely the difficult encounter of self and world can occur as an encounter in which the world appears as something different and other, as something that exists in itself rather than that it is just an object for us to master. Art, in this sense, can only be understood as confrontation (see Mäkiloskela, 2012).

Resistance from the Perspective of the Teacher

The first point to make is that the encounter with the experience of resistance is not only of fundamental importance from the point of view of the child or student, but also from the perspective of the teacher or educator. Here we might say that the educational “work” only really begins with the experience of resistance. It is after all only when children or students resist that they appear as subjects in the educational relationship rather than as (willing) objects of educational interventions. Another way of putting it is to say that without resistance education is nothing more than the monologue of the teacher (which also means that without a teacher education becomes a monologue of the student – which is one of the reasons why the language of learning is inadequate as an educational language; see Biesta, 2006; 2010a).

The Education of the Will

The question of resistance and its educational significance brings us back to a rather old and largely forgotten educational theme, namely that of the education of the will.³ If the head represents the domain of thought and knowledge, and if the heart represents the domain of feeling, then the hands can be seen as representing the domain of the will, that is, the domain from which our initiatives and actions emerge – which suggests that, in a sense, it is even the domain from which the self emerges.⁴ Looking at the engagement with the experience of resistance in this way, we can see that if we put too much will into and onto the world – if we impose our will upon the world, as I have formulated it above – we ultimately end up destroying the very thing that resists, and thus end up in world-destruction. If, on the other hand, we withdraw from the world, that is, if we do not to take initiative and do not act – if there is too little “will,” so we might say – we do not come into the world, we do not achieve worldly existence. To stay in the middle ground between the two extremes of world-destruction and self-destruction is therefore precisely a process of the education of the will, in that the aim is to have “enough” will – not too little and not too much – in order to maintain a dialogical relationship

³ While the question of the education of the will was a rather common topic in the educational literature at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century – see, for example, Hall (1882); Payot (1911) – it has gradually disappeared from the educational discussion (one of the few recent papers on the topic is Sockett 1988). Nowadays Steiner education is one of the few school concepts in which the educational of the will is still being discussed and given attention (see, for example, Mitchell & Livingston 2010).

⁴ There is of course a deeper and more detailed discussion to be had about the idea of the will and its location. By locating the will in the domain of the hands – the domain of action and initiative – I am suggesting that the will should first and foremost be understood as an active and agentic “force.” While thinking and feeling play a role in our actions and initiatives, they are not in themselves the forces that “spur” us into action. They are rather “forces” that “transform” and “support” our actions and initiatives. I say more about this below.

between self and world. To refer to this as the education of the will means that we are aiming to make our will into a force that can support our existence in the world, rather than that it operates as a force that destroys the world or as a force that destroys the (conditions for the worldly existence of the) self. The willpower that emerges from the education of the will is therefore not to be understood as a brute force, but precisely the ability to stay in this middle ground and to endure the difficulty and frustration that comes with being in that position. All this suggests that the education of the will is a question of patience and perseverance, a process that needs time and attention. There is, in other words, no quick fix where it concerns the encounter with resistance and the ability to be “in dialogue” with the world, with what is other and different.

One aspect of the English curriculum for secondary schools is working with so called “resistant materials” such as metal, wood and stone. Such work – which can both take place within the context of design education or art education – provides an excellent example of what it means to engage with the experience of resistance (and therefore provides important opportunities for the education of the will), not only because working with such materials can be a frustrating and difficult experience, but also because if one manages to work with such materials in a successful way, one will experience what it means to establish a dialogical relationship between oneself and what is other – a process in which one will not only find out many things about the materials one is working with, but also about one's own ability to establish and maintain a dialogue, to work through the frustration, to work with the material rather than against it, and so on. While working with resistant materials is one way in which the education of the will can be given form, much can also be gained from working with the experience of social resistance, that is, from encountering and engaging with the resistance posed by other human beings. Here we can think, for example, of the potential of drama education or group work in the context of art projects (see also Lawy, et al. 2010).

To say that the education of the will occurs in the domain of the hands – the domain of action and initiative – is not to suggest that thinking and feeling have no role to play. In this context I first of all wish to emphasise the importance of the difference between feeling *about* the world and feeling *for* the world. Whereas the first, as mentioned above, is about having one's own feelings and thus is a gesture that refers “back” to the self, so to speak, the second is a gesture that reaches out to the world. Feeling *for* the world means having enthusiasm for and being enthused by the world, where there is a desire to engage with the world – both the material and the social world. It is what Hannah Arendt, in the context of a discussion about education, referred to as a *love for the world* (see Arendt, 1977, p. 196). Similarly, whereas we can think of the domain of the head, the domain of knowledge and thought, as a connection at a distance where we try to extract knowledge from the world and where the world thus appears as a object of our knowledge, we can also

conceive of this domain in terms of giving careful attention to the world so that the world can appear in its otherness. Here knowing is not a matter of mastery and control, but becomes a matter of *aletheia* – that is of “disclosure” or “unconcealment” (see Heidegger, 1998).

The Impatience of Society

If, so far, I have focused on the question how at an individual level we might engage with the experience of resistance, I wish, to conclude my observations, to look briefly at the question how modern society engages with and responds to the experience of resistance. Questions that arise here are, for example, how much patience modern society has and how strong its desire for dialogue is, that is, to what extent it prefers dialogue over destruction or withdrawal. These are, of course, big and complex cultural “themes.” One way in which we can make these issues more concrete is to look at the way in which society – either in the more general sense of, say, public opinion, or in the more concrete sense of policies and politics – looks at and engages with education. What, so we might say, does society want from the school? What do politicians want from the school? And how do they look at the school more generally?

I am inclined to argue that what we find here is predominantly an impatient look. Not only do we find a desire to put as much world as possible into the child or student. We also find a desire to do this as quickly and cheaply as possible, to constantly monitor and measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the operation, to make teachers' salaries dependent on the extent to which they succeed in producing pre-specified “learning outcomes.” And we see it in the use of medication to make children ready for the smooth operations of the educational system, that is, to adjust them to the requirements of the system rather than to acknowledge that the first interest of the educational system should actually be in the children they are supposed to educate. It can even lead to a situation where any resistance by children or students can only be perceived in terms of learning difficulties that require “treatment” and not as a sign of their emerging subjectivity.⁵

The impatience of society vis-à-vis the school is therefore a sign of society's inability to give a place to the fundamental complexity and openness of all educational processes and practices, that is, to the fact that all education always and necessarily entails a *risk* (see Biesta, in press). The desire to think of educational improvement as a trajectory towards the creation of a perfect school, a school which

⁵ This is not to suggest that learning difficulties may not exist, but it is to warn against the tendency to see any manifestation of maladjustment as a learning difficulty and to be open to the fact that such maladjustment can also be evidence of the (emerging) subjectivity of the child or student. This also suggests that “educational difficulty” might be a much better rubric than “learning difficulty,” as it locates the (perceived) difficulty in the relationships between the education system and the individual, rather than that it places it entirely inside the individual.

is totally predictable, totally transparent and totally effective in its ambition to produce certain “outcomes” – be they formulated in terms of knowledge, skills and dispositions or in terms of capacities and identities (see also Priestley & Biesta in press) – is therefore a dangerous desire. The reason for this is that it ultimately eradicates the very “imperfection” that makes education educational (if, that is, the educational interest is seen as orientated towards the emergence of human subjects rather than the production of inhuman objects).

Just as a dialogue is not a contest but a way of engagement that aims to do justice to all involved, it is crucial to see that the school – and schooling more generally – is not a contest either. Education is too important to be approached in terms of winners and losers, which is why the ongoing desire for league tables, for the identification of who is better and who is best, who is the winner and who is the loser, is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what education is and should be “about.”

Slow Schools: Closed towards Society and Open towards the World

In this paper I have looked at education through the question of the connection of child and world. I have argued that this connection can occur in three qualitatively different ways, that is, through knowing, feeling or acting – which I have connected to the old adage of the education of head, heart and hands. Starting from the observation that it is at the level of acting and initiative, the domain of the hands, that we connect most directly and immediately, I have explored the different ways in which we can engage with the experience of resistance – the resistance of the material world and the resistance of the social world – that at some point we will inevitably encounter.

I have pointed at two extremes, that of *world-destruction* and *self-destruction*, in order to argue that the educational space is located in the *middle ground* between these extremes; a middle ground where we neither impose our will on to what resists, nor withdraw from it, but aim to establish a dialogue between ourselves in the world, so that our worldly existence becomes possible at the very same time that the world becomes possible. This means that in the dialogue of child and world both the existence of the child and the existence of the world are “at stake,” and this is one reason for suggesting that our educational efforts should be world-centred, rather than child-centred or subject-centred.

I have emphasised that for our worldly existence to be possible we need to engage with and “work through” the frustration of staying in the educational middle ground. This requires time and attention, endurance and perseverance, and a more general appreciation of the fact that the difficulty of education is a worthwhile and, so we might say, *necessary* difficulty. As there are no quick fixes in achieving a dialogical relationship between self and world this suggests that there is a need to slow education down rather than to speed it up towards ever greater “perfection.”

That is why I wish to underscore the need for slowing education down so that schooling can become slow (see, for example, Holt, 2002; Meirieu, 2008).

A slow school, so I wish to suggest, is a school that takes the educational significance of the experience of resistance seriously in that it understands that it is through engagement with the experience of resistance that our worldly existence in the world and thus the existence of the world itself become possible. A slow school thus needs to give resistance a place, which also means that it needs to resist the all too simple demands for personalisation, flexibility and a customer orientation if such demands are aimed at taking the essential difficulty out of the educational process. It also suggests that there is a need for the school itself to resist (see Meirieu, 2008), that is, to not simply be a function or instrument of society. One important reason for this is that “society” never exists in the abstract but always in a particular manifestation or hegemony, where the interests of some are served better than the interests of others. This suggests that each time the school is called upon to “serve” society, the school at least needs to ask which society or whose society it is actually supposed to serve – which ultimately is the democratic question schools should have a voice in.

What emerges from this is an image of the school as closed towards society but open towards the world – and this is another dimension of what I have in mind with the idea of world-centred education. Such an image of the school brings us back to the root-meaning of the word “school,” as the Greek word σχολή (scholē) originally meant “free time” or “leisure time,” that is time *not* determined by external agendas or demands from society. It is a time where such demands are suspended so that the dialogue between child and world can come into existence in order for the child and the world themselves to come into existence.

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Author Details

Gert Biesta (www.gertbiesta.com) is Professor of Education at the School of Education, University of Stirling. Contact address: School of Education, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland, UK. E-mail: gert.biesta@stir.ac.uk (from January 2013 onwards: gert.biesta@uni.lu)

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